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ABSTRACT

Administrators and supervisors bear much of the responsibility for seeing that many things currently not happening in the language arts classroom do happen. Perhaps they do not take leadership in the language arts area because they are uncertain as to what elements make a good program. There are eight essential elements to look for in a good language arts program. First, there should be evidence of a specific objective for any observed lesson. Second, an observable sequence of skills should be taught within each grade and from grade to grade. Third, students should be actively involved in language learning. Fourth, lessons should reflect recent research findings in the teaching of language arts. Fifth, lessons should reflect specific teaching of speaking and listening skills. Sixth, composition should be taught, not assigned. Seventh, lessons should reflect the integration of skills with content in a total program. Eighth, administrators and supervisors should be actively involved in the development and implementation of the language arts program. To improve programs with deficiencies, instructional leaders should work closely with teachers in the areas of curriculum development, inservice planning, and professional improvement programs. This can be done only if schools provide more supervision time for those in leadership positions. (FL)

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What Is NOT Happening in the Language Arts Classroom?

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Unfortunately, many things that should happen in Language Arts classrooms are not happening--and it is to a large extent the responsibility of administrators and supervisors who are the instructional leaders to see that they do happen. In our many visits to schools, we are often more impressed with what we do not see than what we do see in the teaching of language arts. We also are often more impressed with the lack of instructional leadership on the part of administrators and supervisors than with the demonstration of its presence. The two go together.

Perhaps some administrators and supervisors do not take leadership in the area of Language Arts because they are uncertain as to what elements to look for in a good program, or what to do about it if any of the elements are missing. We believe that there are eight essential elements in a good language arts program; that, in fact, many of these elements are essential to a good program in any subject. We also believe there are definite steps instructional leaders can take to bring about improvement.

The first of these elements is: the observation of any lesson yields evidence of a specific objective or goal. Teachers should know what it is they hope to accomplish with each lesson. They also should know if they have been successful. Reason should guide instruction, and students should in some way be different after the instruction.

This means that it will be necessary to know what material students have had and to what degree they have mastered it. It also suggests that all teach[illegible] have some idea of where they want students to be in terms of knowledge acquired, skills mastered, and experiences gained at the conclusion of their K-12 educational involvement. It also demands that each teacher knows where he or she fits in this plan.

Too often, lessons are dictated by the textbook currently in use in the classroom. Although commercial materials can be attractive and useful, they may not meet the needs of a particular group of students at a particular point in time. Other resources--teacher or student prepared--are often more in tune with the needs of students. It may be feasible to use such material in conjunction with a variety of commercial materials.

Supervisors can help the classroom teacher to develop an awareness for the need to plan lessons with objectives and evaluative means in mind. A supervisor can discuss lessons with the teacher to ascertain what it is the teacher hopes to accomplish and how to evaluate success. If a formal observation is a part of the supervisor's job, the observer can request a statement of the objectives to be reached during the lesson. In a post-observation conference, each can determine how successful the lesson has been in terms of these objectives.

Teachers can evaluate by asking themselves at the end of each lesson, at the end of the day, and at the end of an instructional unit what objective was supposed to be reached and if it has been. At staff or department meetings such questions can be directed at each teacher. Although such meetings may not be the best place for personal confession, this is an opportunity to raise the awareness as to the importance of such questions.

The staff can be involved in curriculum development, even if it progresses no further than questioning what skills, concepts, knowledges need to be covered at a particular point in the educational continuum. This aspect alone may be enough to stimulate thought on the part of the classroom teacher as to what is happening in a particular class and what should happen there!

If more time, energy, and even money can be spent on such curriculum work, it would be sensible to develop various means by which these objectives can be reached; a start on this can often be made through a teacher "activity swap." Each teacher devises a number of activities to use to reach a specific objective. These activities are then compiled. The net result is a list of objectives and suggested teacher-tried activities to meet them.

As a supervisor, you need to provide the support and where-with-all for language arts teachers to develop lessons which embody discernible objectives and a means to evaluate progress.

Second, an observablesequence of skills is being taught within each grade and from grade to grade. Textbooks often establish the curriculum or the skills to be taught. Usually a scope and sequence chart accompanies such books. It is assumed that merely providing such a chart guarantees that there will be an observable sequence of skills taught; however, too often it appears as if language arts consists of a series of discrete skills which bear little or no relationship to each other or to content. In addition, the program is divided into segments or areas, namely reading, composition, language or grammar, literature, and listening/speaking. These areas are treated as discrete also. One begins to feel that teachers do not see any relationship among these segments or the skills attributed to each.

Only a cursory glance at any listing of skills suggested for one of these segments or areas illustrates the sameness of many of the skills. If one of the skills, such as recognition of a main idea and supporting details were listed, the sameness of this concept of skill is certainly identifiable in at least four of the areas of language arts cited above. This is true of a number of skills and concepts; therefore, the teaching of a number of skills in language arts is reinforceable in a number of lessons and activities.

The creation of a written statement of objectives or a curriculum statement (discussed under the first point) creates a situation where teachers know when certain skills and concepts are introduced, when they are emphasized, and when they are reviewed. Such a statement helps to avoid needless repetition in the classroom. It should also help teachers to develop activities, to select materials, and to plan teaching strategies to reach objectives at a particular grade level. Such a statement gives a certain amount of freedom to the teacher as to how to accomplish the task; and it can give a certain leeway for additional materials and content for lesson planning. If one has a sequence of skills which is known to all, it permits planning and evaluating. It eliminates guess work as to who is teaching what, when. Evaluation is important not only of students' progress but of the instructional program as well.

The teaching of skills, as other things, in some way needs to be based on learning theory. It does not make much sense to teach on the abstract level if children are still dependent on the concrete. Little is accomplished if universal conclusions are called for, and students are still operating on an egocentric plane.

One has to question the repetition found within an instructional program. For example, a widely-used grammar text, intended for use at grades seven through twelve, is for all practical purposes, the same at all levels.

If one questions teachers at various levels, the usual response is that students do not have competency in handling the skills. Does this suggest that students are stupid? Or does it suggest that repetitive coverage does not enable students to reach an objective? Does it suggest that teachers are not doing their job? Or does it suggest that there may be another way to accomplish the task? What ever the answers are to such questions, we believe that a hard look has to be taken at what skills we are teaching students, how we are teaching and when. Not all learning is additive; but most certainly, it is not all discrete.

Administrators and supervisors can study the curriculum to see if there is a sequence, but not needless repetition. If the sequence is there, it is the supervisor's job to see that teachers are familiar with it. If it is not there, inservice and curriculum development time must be provided to work out the sequence most desirable in that school. In addition, during an inservice session, leaders can have teachers who work at various grade levels develop lessons for a particular objective or skill. These lessons should show a progression in sophistication suitable for various grade levels although they cover the same objective.

Third, students are actively involved in language learning, not just passive receivers. Often teachers find it necessary to dominate the classroom with their intellectual and physical being. Questions and answers are thrown at students like stones. Little attempt is made to involve students in this question-answer process. The physical arrangement of the students itself often mitigates against a free flowing exchange.

Students are engaged in this teacher question-student response routine which relies on a modified two way conversation at best, or they are busily engaged in workbooks, reading, writing responses to questions, or some other type of passive activity. Many students have, in fact, removed themselves mentally if not physically from the classroom.

Language is a living dynamic tool and must be taught and used dynamically. Students are never too young to be involved in the use of purposeful language which is directed at a particular audience.

Because language is a living thing, one expects the classes involved in learning languages reflect this dynamism. There are many ways to do this.

Group work is essential because language is not used by one person in isolation. Group work can be suited to instruction in any phase of the language arts program. Role playing, creative dramatics, prepared and extemporaneous skits, class publications, poetry readings, discussions, story telling, interest corners, language fairs, and games all help to make the classroom vibrant.

It is necessary that education as a whole approach language arts in this manner. Many helps to teachers are available to give them the means by which such an approach can be used. The National Council of Teachers of English catalog of professional publications which is published annually would be just a start to make teachers aware of the number of ways that the learning process can be made a dynamic one.

Fourth, lessons reflect recent research findings in the teaching of language arts. Perhaps it is too much to expect each professional to be cognizant of research in the field and even more to expect that lessons reflect findings of that research. Often educational leaders, as well as teachers, seem ignorant or unaware of research data which suggests that language arts should or should not be taught in a certain way.

Two areas of research may be used to illustrate this point. The first such finding emerges from the research done in relation to response to literature (McGreal, 1976; Lucking, 1976; Sullivan, 1974; Heil, 1974; Odell and Cooper, 1976). This research shows that students learn a way of responding through teacher expectations. Evidence also shows that students can and do react to teachers' questioning patterns and that students can be taught a variety of ways to develop breadth and depth in their responses. (See for further explication, Petrosky, Anthony. "Research Roundup," The English Journal, Vol. 66 No. 7, October 1977, p. 96-98.)

Any administrator or supervisor who has observed the instructional process for a period of time will discover what we call the TQ=SR? approach to learning.

The formula symbolizes the sequence in which the teacher asks a question; the student responds. The response is often mumbled, mono-syllabic and unsure. This seems to have little impact on the teacher who immediately elaborates effusively and in reality answers the question in the desired way.

Teachers should raise questions which require answers at all levels of the cognitive taxonomy. Students' responses should be questioned, if necessary, to ascertain whether in fact there is a true understanding of the points which are covered. Teachers should not necessarily have predetermined answers for questions that they ask.

Nothing as elaborate as a Flander's Analysis needs to be done to make teachers aware of the approach used in a classroom. Have teachers step back to analyze what happened in the classroom during a particular lesson. What questions were asked? What were the responses? How could the questions be changed to vary responses? Who responded? How much teacher talk was there for each question? Was communication between teacher and student alone, or did it include discussion among the students themselves?

A number of teaching/learning strategies work in a classroom. Teachers need exposure to these through class visitation, demonstration lessons, and professional interchange--inservice courses, workshops or simply reading.

"No empirical evidence exists for teaching grammar for any purpose."[1] This quotation suggests another research finding to illustrate the point. As the Harris study shows, the study of grammar consumes a large portion of time in the classroom which takes away time which might be used more profitably in the study of some other aspect of language arts.

Although the Petrosky article from which the above quotation is taken is based on a review of the Elley study and the one done by Harris, a review of thirty years of research related to the teaching of grammar unquestionably makes the same point.

We suggest that you as an educational leader visit any school and observe language arts classes. We predict that you will find at least one class on grammar per se being taught during that visit. To make this situation even more questionable, if you take the time to question the instructor as to why this particular lesson is being taught, invariably the reason will be given that all types of improvements are possible through such a lesson.

The most frequent reasons given are that the students' written work will improve, that they need such basic skills for college work, that such lessons will raise students' performance to that of "gone-by" days, and that students will need this knowledge if they study a foreign language. These reasons have been disproved by reasearch.

What compounds the problem is the fact that many administrators and supervisors believe these reasons; the public, in general, not only accepts them--particularly the supposed relationship between grammar study and writing--but advocates grammar study in the "back to the basics" movement.

Administrators and supervisors can become conversant with the research which has been done and is being done in the field of language arts. Reading Language Arts, The English Journal and Research in the Teaching of English helps to do this. Teachers should also be encouraged to read these journals. Short capsulated versions covering pertinent points of research could also be made and circulated among staff members.

Work to implement the research in questioning into classroom lessons may be easier than handling the work in grammar, but work needs to begin to bring classroom practices in line with research findings, and these are only two examples of such findings which are relevant to the language arts classroom.

Fifth, lessons reflect specific teaching of speaking and listening skills. Despite the fact that both listening and speaking form the basis for all other language arts, and despite the fact that a much larger part of one's adult life is spent in listening and speaking than in reading and writing, speaking and listening skills are rarely taught. Sometimes people believe they are being taught if students are occasionally assigned oral reports or three minute speeches. The net result of the assignments usually is a high rate of absenteeism among those who are to speak and a high rate of inattention among those who are to listen.

A good program in teaching speaking and listening skills includes instruction in such things as critical listening, creative listening, productive discussion, the use of listening and speaking in problem solving and valuing, creative dramatics, role-playing, story-telling and oral interpretation of literature.

The role of the educational leaders in improving the program to see that there is a series of objectives, K-12, in the curriculum in the areas mentioned, and also to see that a meaningful amount of instructional time is spent in the direct teaching of these skills. As we all know, a series of objectives in a curriculum can be only that if not translated into action.

Since most language arts textbooks do not do much more than mention listening and speaking in passing, a collection of books should be made available in the professional library to aid the teacher in developing activities; teachers should be encouraged to share successful practices at formal and informal meetings; and teachers should be given opportunities to develop and practice their own speaking and listening skills at professional meetings and workshops.

Sixth, composition is taught, rather than assigned. Too often the students are told that a composition on a particular topic or perhaps a choice of topics is due Monday; the students either writes or does not write the composition; the composition is returned with several red marks, a grade, and perhaps a comment, and that is the end of composition until the next topic is assigned.

If the teacher is asked what was done to prepare students for writing the particular composition, often the answer is a reference to grammar exercises done earlier in the year. If composition is taught, such writing skills as focusing on a particular purpose, choosing vocabulary, style and content for a particular audience, organizing the content according to purpose, using sufficient detail, examples or reasons to support the purpose will be stressed. There will be pre-writing activities, for example, small group discussions, brainstorming, role-playing, writing a class composition on the chalk board, class experimentation with different ways of expressing similar ideas. The teacher will be spending more time on the pre-writing activities and the skills involved than on the post-writing correction.

What can you do to help the teachers? One thing would be to see that the curriculum is not so overloaded with literature to "cover" that inadequate time is left to teach composition. Also, the curriculum should include sufficient specific objectives in writing with many sample activities explained for each objective. Another thing you can do is to see that the classes are not so large as to preclude any kind of individual attention to the students. Administrators and supervisors can encourage displays of student work in classrooms, libraries, and offices, can read sets of student compositions from time to time, can ask teachers what they do to prepare students for writing, and can encourage teachers to write and to attend writing workshops.

Seventh, lessons reflect integration of skills with content in a total language arts program. It is obvious that one speaks about something, listens to something, reads something, writes about something; yet often the skills involved in these activities are taught as if the content were non-existent or unimportant. A reliance on workbooks, ditto sheets, writing out answers to questions at the end of the chapter, and dull textbook exercises trivalizes both the student's thinking and the content of the material presented. Discussion, writing, listening can be centered on content meaningful to the students, the significance of the literature, problems or issues that actually exist. The teaching of grammar and usage should center on the student's own oral and written language, not textbook exercises. In addition, careful attention should be paid to the fact that language skills are applicable to all content areas, not just the language arts classes.

Administrators and supervisors can see that there is not an excessive reliance on workbooks and ditto sheets but encourage more dynamic and involving lessons. They can become familiar with some of the content, a short story, for example, and discuss it with the students. They can encourage attention to language arts skills in all classes and in all presentations, demonstrations, written explanations, record keeping, and testing.

Eighth, administrators and supervisors are actively involved with the development and implementation of the language arts program. The best language arts programs we have seen have been in schools where the administrators and supervisors are knowledgeable about and take an active interest in the programs. Too often, administrators bury themselves under a mound of paper in the inner office and do not get into the classrooms, do not attend department and committee meetings except the ones at which they preside, and do not commend active and creative teaching. Too often supervisors spend more time shuttling books, AV equipment and supplies, and transmitting messages from the central office than they do in

in actually supervising the program.

What is desperately needed in most school systems is more time to supervise. How much of the paper work is really necessary, and how much is an excuse for not exercising real leadership? All those in leadership positions should fight for more time to be involved in school programs. Supervisors and department heads should not be expected to teach a full load of classes and supervise in addition. In many schools, the position of department head is only nominal because he or she teaches a full load of classes. In those cases, the principal is expected to do the supervision, but he or she rarely does anything but make one or two visits to the classrooms of non-tenured teachers in order to fill out (or not fill out, as the case may be) a recommendation for rehiring.

In some districts the number of supervisory visits to a classroom is limited by contract. However, supervision can still be done through conferences with teachers, examination of pupil work, working with committees, attending department meetings and attending inservice workshops. A further word about inservice workshops--administrators and supervisors not only ought to attend them, but they also should take an active part. If they do no more than observe, teachers feel that the interest is more in rating their attendance and performance at the workshop than in the improvement of the instructional program.

The demonstration of active and knowledgeable interest in the language arts program can establish a good working relationship with teachers for the benefit of all students.

The following is a summary of the aspects of a good language arts program which we feel instructional leaders should look for in exercising their leadership:

1. The observation of any given lesson yields evidence of a specific objective or goal.
2. Teachers teach an observable sequence of skills within each grade and from grade to grade.
3. Language learning makes students active participants, not passive receivers.
4. Lessons reflect recent research findings in the teaching of language arts.
5. Lessons reflect specific teaching of listening and speaking skills.
6. Lessons reflect the teaching of composition, not just the assignment of it.
7. Lessons reflect integration of skills with content in a total language arts program.
8. Administrators and supervisors are actively involved with the development and implementation of the language arts program.

Footnote

Anthony R. Petrosky, "Grammar Instruction: What We Know," The English Journal, Vol. 66, No. 9, December 1977, p. 86.

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